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Untranslated Words in the Book of Mormon

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Source: *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar*

Published: Salt Lake City; Cornerstone Publishing, 1999 (1st Edition)

Page(s): 344–347

UNTRANSLATED WORDS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

And after having received the record of the Nephites, yea, even my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., might have power to translate through the mercy of God, by the power of God, the Book of Mormon. (D&C 1:29)

Anyone who knows a foreign language knows that it is not always possible to accurately translate a word into one's own tongue. A good example is the French word *chez*. If one uses the expression *chez Paul*, it might be rendered in English "with Paul," "at Paul's house," "at Paul's place" (including a place of business), or even "pertaining to Paul." Yet the word *chez* means neither "with" nor "house" nor "place" nor "pertaining." It is not really translatable into English.

The Book of Mormon includes several words that were not translated into English, probably because no English equivalent was known to the prophet Joseph Smith. In this chapter, we shall examine those words.

ZIFF

The word "*ziff*" denotes something that was taxed by wicked King Noah, along with gold, silver, copper, brass, iron, and agricultural produce (Mosiah 11:3). Because *ziff* and the other metals were used to ornament the king's buildings (Mosiah 11:8-11), it is likely that it was some type of metal. The word may derive from the Hebrew *zim*, meaning "splendor, brightness."¹ In a 1964

¹ This suggestion was first made by Robert F. Smith, in a private communication to the author.

paper, Read H. Putnam speculated that ziff may have been zinc or tumbaga, which is an alloy of copper and gold.² Because tumbaga is particularly beautiful and has a definite redness, Robert F. Smith compared the word *ziff* with the Arabic roots *zlw* and *zyy*, meaning “adorn, cause to shine, redden.”³ These roots are cognate to the Hebrew *ziv*, Arabic and Hebrew being related languages.

It may be that *ziff* denotes a metal found in nature, such as electrum, which is a mixture of gold and silver. Another naturally occurring alloy may be what the medieval chemists called *kharsini*, which may have been a combination of arsenic and antimony.⁴

Plato wrote of a metal called *orichalkos* (Greek for “mountain copper”) that was formerly mined in Atlantis and that was the most valuable of metals after gold (*Critias* 114). He indicated that the metal gleamed and that it was used, along with bronze, tin, silver, and gold, to decorate buildings (*Critias* 116). He also noted that the first ten kings of Atlantis wrote their laws in *orichalkos* on a sacrificial pillar in the temple of Poseidon (*Critias* 119-20). Strabo also spoke of *orichalkos*, indicating that it was a mixture of zinc and copper (*Geography* 13.1.56). Consequently, though associated by Plato with myths about Atlantis, the metal

² “Were the Plates of Mormon of Tumbaga?” *The Fifteenth Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures* (Provo: University Archaeological Society, BYU, 16 May 1964), 106, citing Sperry, *Problems of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 147, and Mosiah 11:8.

³ Private communication to the author.

⁴ L. G. Alieva and A. M. Gasanova wrote an article (in Russian) on the “Problem of the unknown metal kharsini in medieval written sources,” in *Doklady Akademii Nauk Azerbaidzhanskoi SSR* 37/4 (1981), 84-87. An English abstract of the article appeared in *Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts* 19/1 (1982):111, and reads as follows: “References in the writings of medieval chemists to kharsini are not clear in identifying the materials. According to modern chemists, kharsini is brass or antimony. Evidence is presented, however, that kharsini is a native metal which contains both arsenic and antimony.”

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actually existed and was known to the ancient Greeks. Because it was mined, it was evidently not an artificial alloy.

SHEUM AND NEAS

The terms *sheum* and *neas* are included in a list of food crops that includes corn, wheat, barley, and other seeds (Mosiah 9:9). Consequently, they probably denote cereal grains.

Sheum is a common Akkadian word referring to cereal grains, often used to denote either wheat or barley. *Neas* is harder to explain, but we may compare it with the Late Babylonian term *nešū*, the name of an unidentified plant. Or the ending may be related to the Sumerian word *as̄*, again denoting either wheat or cereal grains in general. The initial element may be from Sumerian *ni*, which is known in the word *ni-giḡ*, denoting something of grain.⁵ Sumerian and Akkadian were languages spoken in ancient Mesopotamia, where the tower of Babel was built. It may be that the words *sheum* and *neas* were used by the Jaredites, who came from that region, and that they were later borrowed by the Nephites.

Though we can guess at their meanings, we cannot know what plants were designated by the terms *sheum* and *neas*. There are several possibilities, including what we now call *amaranth*, a cereal grain from the New World that was unknown in Lehi's homeland.

CURELOMS AND CUMOMS

Perhaps the most mysterious of the untranslated terms in the Book of Mormon are the *cureloms* and *cumoms* of Ether 9:19. They are included in a list of animals said to have been "useful" to the Jaredites, including horses, asses and elephants. The preceding verse (Ether 9:18), on the other hand, lists animals that the

⁵ Some of these etymological suggestions came from Robert F. Smith, while others originated with the author.

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Jaredites ate, such as cattle, oxen, cows, sheep, swine, goats and “other kinds of animals.” From this context, it is clear that the *cureloms* and *cumoms* were non-food animals, perhaps used as pack animals.

There are many animals in the New World that were not known in the world from which the Jaredites and Lehi’s family came, and some of these could well have served as pack animals. One thinks of the various camelids, such as the llama, the alpaca, and the vicuña, or the tapir. Unfortunately, the languages of Mesopotamia, where the Jaredites originated, are not helpful in identifying the *cureloms* and *cumoms*. It is possible that the terms were borrowed from other people the Jaredites encountered during their travels. It is likely that Moroni did not know to what animals these terms referred and hence merely used the words he found in the Jaredite record.

CONCLUSION

While we cannot clearly identify the untranslated words in the Book of Mormon, the context in which they are used allows us to determine that *ziff* refers to a metal, that *sheum* and *neas* refer to plants (probably cereal grains), and that *cureloms* and *cumoms* refer to animals. In the case of three of these words—*ziff*, *sheum*, and *neas*—we have precedents in the languages spoken in the homelands of the Book of Mormon peoples that confirm these identifications.

Their very existence is strong evidence that the Book of Mormon is a translation. If it had been written by Joseph Smith, such untranslated words, especially ones that correlate closely with ancient Old World languages wholly unknown to Joseph Smith, would almost certainly have been absent.